



The first Odom Family Reunion in 1949

PROPERTY OF LAREATHA CLAY

The Community That Love Built: Shankleville

BY DETEC COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST BRITTNEY JOHNSON

“Some folks think historic preservation is only for the mansions of famous people, but everyone’s history is worth preserving. Even a modest house and a modest story are worth remembering.”

—Lareatha Clay; Texas Highways 2013 Extraordinary Texans

Lareatha Clay and her family have unquestionably succeeded in preserving their history and certainly have a story to tell. In the early 1800s, Clay’s great-great-great-grandparents, Jim and Winnie Shankle, met on a Mississippi plantation. When Winnie and her three children were later sold to a family in Texas, Jim set out to accomplish the unthinkable—to find them. He traveled at night by foot for more than 400 miles, swimming the mighty Mississippi River and scavenging for food. Many weeks after he began, Jim found Winnie in Deep East Texas drawing water from her master’s spring. After days of remaining in hiding, Jim revealed himself to Winnie’s owner, who agreed to purchase him. Winnie and Jim then worked together and raised Winnie’s three children and six of their own until gaining freedom by emancipation.

In 1867, Jim and Winnie purchased their first parcel of land. Eventually, the Shankles, along with their associate, Steve

McBride, who was also their son-in-law, would own more than 4,000 acres and establish the community of Shankleville. In its prime, Shankleville was a thriving freedmen’s community of flourishing farms with a cotton gin; saw, grist and syrup mills; general store; blacksmith shop; churches; and several schools, one of which was the McBride College that existed from 1883 to 1909. Today, the Shankleville community is home to more than 50 families.

While visiting with Clay, it became apparent that the founding couple’s traits of commitment, perseverance, hard work and leadership have intrinsically become attributes that can also be used to describe descendants and residents of Shankleville.

Clay, an independent Dallas-based business consultant, was recognized as one of Texas Highways magazine’s 2013 Extraordinary Texans for her part in forming the Shankleville Historical Society in 1988. Clay also serves on the boards of trustees for the Friends of the Texas Historical Commission and the Dallas Arboretum, and is a former board member of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra League Innovators and the University of Texas Ex-Students Association. She is also a former commissioner of the Texas Historical Commission. In 2003, she and her mother



PHOTO PROVIDED BY LAREATHA CLAY



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ABOVE LEFT: Elzie Odom and Larutha Odom-Clay pose with a local student at the unveiling of the Texas Historical Commission's 'African Americans in Texas' brochure.

ABOVE RIGHT: The Odom Family: Jimmie Odom, grandson of Jim and Winnie Shankle, and his family. Standing on left is A.T. Odom, Lareatha Clay's grandfather.

LEFT: Lareatha Clay

and sister became the first black members of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

Other accomplished Shankleville descendants and residents include: Oklahoma City Thunder player Kendrick Perkins; former Mayor David Riggins of Vinton, Louisiana; Lufkin City Councilman Robert Shankle; Beaumont City Councilman Audwin Samuel; former Green Bay Packers player Steve Odom; renowned educator and psychologist Asa Hilliard; parents and other relatives of former New York Giants player and media personality Michael Strahan; Elzie Odom, who was the first African-American U.S. Postal Inspector in Texas and just the fifth in the nation, as well as serving as Arlington's first African-American council member and mayor, along with countless other businessmen, educators, community leaders, activists and ministers.

Since 1940, descendants have gathered in the community every first weekend in August to hold Homecoming services in which their past and present accomplishments are celebrated. Since the Shankleville Historical Society's inception, the society has hosted various reunions and historical events, and awarded countless educational scholarships. Each year, scholarship applicants recount their ancestors' legacy by analyzing an "inherited Shankleville trait."

Past topics included "Avoiding Mediocrity," "Diligence" and "Restraint." In 2012, the group held a ceremony to place a National Register of Historic Places plaque on the 1922 homestead of Addie L. and A.T. Odom, Clay's grandparents. The craftsman house and outbuildings sit on a hill above the spring where Jim and Winnie were reunited. Inspired by her memory of picking peas with her grandparents, Clay and the society are currently planning its first Texas Purple Hull Pea Festival, which will include pea picking and shelling contests, cooking contests and classes, live music, and other events. The festival will be held June 21 at the Odom Homestead in Shankleville.

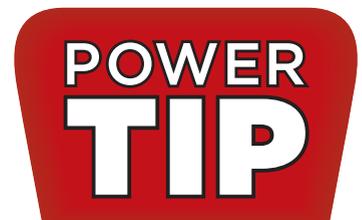
Shankleville is near Clear Creek two miles southwest of Burkeville between state highways 63 and 87 in north-central Newton County. To learn more about Shankleville, visit shankleville.org.



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